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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 002412

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/14/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL RS

SUBJECT: YOUTH-DOMINATED RUSSIAN BLOGOSPHERE CRITICAL OF U.S., GEORGIA

REF: MOSCOW 02364

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Alice Wells
for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Since the onset of violence in South Ossetia, Russian bloggers have utilized internet sites to blaspheme the U.S. and Georgia, organize opposition events, and call for extreme measures. Dominated by Russia's youth, these online fora remain decidedly pro-Russia with little sympathy for Georgian citizens. On the other hand, bloggers who provided links to nationalist pages called for repressive measures against Georgian citizens in Russia. The pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi further fanned rumors of U.S. military involvement in the fighting. Polling data echoed the support for South Ossetia on Russian blogs, showing that 71% sympathized with the plight of the separatist region's residents. End Summary.

Blogosphere Remains Anti-American, Anti-Georgian

¶2. (SBU) While information directly from South Ossetia remained sparse, Russian bloggers continued to hammer President Bush and the USG for support of the "Georgian Hitler," Mikhail Saakashvili. The majority of commenters either expressed pride in Russia's ability to protect its citizens, chastised the barbaric actions of the GOG, or blamed the USG for its military, financial, and political support of the GOG (reftel). One Russian blogger on www.LiveJournal.ru, Russia's most heavily frequented site, praised the Russian mission in South Ossetia as "a new step in the development of the country, similar to the falling of the Berlin Wall, turning the country around 180 degrees. We now live in a new country." Another blogger proclaimed South Ossetia and Abkhazia to be "finally lost" and "de facto parts of the Russian Federation." A third blogger called the new ceasefire agreement "the beginning of the end for Saakashvili."

¶3. (SBU) Although most blog entries focused on Russian accomplishments in the conflict, a few bloggers expressed displeasure with Russia's role in Georgia. A contributor to Live Journal that Russia had no political interest in the Caucasus, only a championship battle between private and corporate interests, especially the political clans in Moscow, Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov, and local "tsars" in the Caucasus. One writer likened the exchange between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and western leaders to a couple of kids fighting over who is "the biggest idiot" for starting the conflict.

Nationalist Groups Press for Action, Not Deportation

¶4. (SBU) Some bloggers posted links to statements of the

ultra-nationalist Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) leader Aleksandr Belov, who argued for the "internalizing" -- that is, depriving movement beyond Russia's borders, preferably into refugee camps -- of Georgian citizens in Moscow. Belov preferred "internalizing" as opposed to deportation since any deported Georgian could be drafted into the military to fight and kill Russian soldiers. Belov noted that the elderly and incapable could be deported, but breaking up families was "inhumane" and, therefore, should only be done according to family preferences. In a separate statement, Belov appealed to internet readers for the nationalization of property in South Ossetia and the cessation of any economic support for the United States, including financial investments. People's Union nationalist leader Sergei Baburin also backed the GOR's actions, pushing Medvedev for the establishment of independent diplomatic relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Youth Movements Lead Street Propaganda

¶5. (SBU) Kremlin-backed youth movement Nashi reportedly arranged a monitoring group that arrived in South Ossetia on August 10. Subsequently, the group published unconfirmed reports, along with gruesome pictures, on its website of the charred body of a "black-skinned" mercenary found in Tshkinvali, South Ossetia. While not explicitly stating such, the commentary made reference to U.S. military support of the GOG army during the conflict. Additionally, bloggers linked to Nashi reports of Georgian military attacks on OSCE peacekeepers with diplomatic immunity. The group promised to report its findings of Georgian military crimes to the investigative committee of the Russian procuracy. Numerous blog entries also discussed the candlelight memorial service held at 00:15 on August 14 at Christ the Savior Church in Moscow, dedicated to the 2,000 lives lost in South Ossetia. Members from the youth movements Nashi, Molodaya Gvardia, and Young Russia organized the vigil and minute of silence. An accompanying message on Nashi's website noted that vigil attendants organized blood donations in the upcoming days.

Polling Data on South Ossetia

¶6. (SBU) A few blog entries made reference to recent polling data public opinion on the conflict. Levada Center poll results from August 12 indicated that 71% of all Russian surveyed sympathized with the South Ossetians while only 2% sympathized with the Georgians. Additionally, 46% of those surveyed felt South Ossetia should become a part of Russia, 34% felt it should become an independent state, and only 4% felt it should remain a part of Georgia. Russians also supported sending political, economic, and humanitarian support to South Ossetia (81%), sending its military to the region (53%), and sending volunteer troops to South Ossetia (57%).

Internet Use: Young, Educated Urbanites

¶7. (C) Polling information suggested that most bloggers in Russia are educated urbanites under 24 years old. Levada Center Director Lev Gudkov told PolOff on August 6 that internet use has grown six times since 2000 in Russia, and its oversight presented challenges and opportunities for the current leadership. Levada Center polling data from July 17 indicated that almost one-third of all Russians utilize the internet, yet only 27% of those used it to read news articles or discuss politics. In fact, at every age group surveyed, newspapers remained the most influential news source for political issues (63% overall). While internet proficiency and interest depended on numerous factors including finances, education, gender, and physical location, the main factor was age, according to Levada. 69% of all Russians surveyed between 18 and 24 years old use the internet as opposed to 5%

of all persons over 55 years of age. Secondly, educated Russians utilized the internet three times more often than those without a higher education, and urban residents twice as often as those in the countryside. Interestingly, the majority of Russians supported free access to all information on the internet (57%) versus some level of censorship (26%).

Comment

¶8. (C) Russian public opinion on blogs remains decidedly anti-American and critical of the Saakashvili regime, and few opinions on the internet showed signs of greater public dissent. Youth leaders and nationalist movements have seized the opportunity to push their platforms and tout their own credentials, while opposition parties remain relatively mute.

As the majority of blog entries likely come from young, educated people in the more cosmopolitan Moscow and Saint Petersburg regions, sentiments in these urban areas remained staunchly pro-Russian.

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